

Hunnic bow was a symbol of supreme authority. In four burial sites the remains of bows entirely or partly encased in engraved gold sheet have been found. One was entirely symbolic: only 80 centimetres long, it was covered with so much gold that it could not have been flexed. The other three were full length, and it's possible that here we are looking at real weapons with gold casings.²⁰ Thus embellished, the source of the Huns' military dominance became a potent image of political power. It also allowed them to dominate the western edge of the Great Eurasian Steppe.

Ammianus Marcellinus was right. It was the Huns who were behind the military revolution that had brought the Tervingi and Greuthungi to the Danube sometime in the late summer or early autumn of 376. At this point, the rise of Hunnic power ceased to be a problem for the peoples of the northern shores of the Black Sea exclusively. It now presented the eastern emperor Valens with a huge dilemma. Tens of thousands of displaced Goths had suddenly arrived on his borders and were requesting asylum.

Asylum Seekers

WITH A RARE UNANIMITY, the vast majority of our sources report that this sudden surge of would-be Gothic immigrants wasn't seen as a problem at all. On the contrary, Valens happily admitted them because he saw in this flood of displaced humanity a great opportunity. To quote Ammianus again – but most other sources tell a similar story:

The affair caused more joy than fear and educated flatterers immoderately praised the good fortune of the prince, which unexpectedly brought him so many young recruits from the ends of the earth, that by the union of his own and foreign forces he would have an invincible army. In addition, instead of the levy of soldiers, which was contributed annually by each province, there would accrue to the treasury a vast amount of gold.

Thus soldiers and gold both at the same time – usually you got one or the other. No wonder Valens was pleased.

Most of the sources also give a broadly similar account of what went wrong after the Goths crossed the river (probably at or around the fortress of Durostorum (map 6)). The blame for what happened

next is placed mostly on the dishonesty of the Roman officials on the spot. For once the immigrants started to run short of supplies, these officials exploited their increasing desperation to run a highly profitable black market, taking slaves from them in return for food. Unsurprisingly, this generated huge resentment, which the Roman military, especially one Lupicinus, commander of the field forces in Thrace (comes Thraciae), only exacerbated. Having first profited from the black market, then having made the Goths move on to a second camp outside his regional headquarters at Marcianople (map 6), he made a botched attack on their leadership, at a banquet supposedly given in their honour. This pushed the Goths from resentment to revolt.²¹ So the story goes, and so it has often been repeated by historians. Blaming Valens for his stupidity in agreeing to admit the Goths, the local Roman military for their greed, and the Goths – just a bit – for resorting to violence makes for a perfectly coherent account. Considered in all its details, however, it is not the whole truth.

Take, to begin with, normal Roman policy towards asylum seekers. Immigrants, willing or otherwise, in 376 were a far from new phenomenon for the Roman Empire. Throughout its history, it had taken in outsiders: a constant stream of individuals looking to make their fortune (not least, as we have seen, in the Roman army), supplemented by occasional large-scale migrations. There was even a technical term for the latter: *receptio*. An inscription from the first century AD records that Nero's governor transported 100,000 people 'from across [north of] the Danube' (*transdanuviani*) into Thrace. As recently as AD 300, the tetrarchic emperors had resettled tens of thousands of Dacian Carpi inside the Empire, dispersing them in communities the length of the Danube, from Hungary to the Black Sea. There had been a number of similar influxes in between, and while there was no single blueprint for how immigrants were to be treated, clear patterns emerge. If relations between the Empire and the would-be asylum seekers were good, and the immigration happening by mutual consent, then some of the young adult males would be drafted into the Roman army, sometimes forming a single new unit, and the rest distributed fairly widely across the Empire as free peasant cultivators who would henceforth pay taxes. This was the kind of arrangement agreed between the emperor Constantius II and some Sarmatian Limigantes, for instance, in 359.²² If relations between the Empire and migrants were not so good, and, in particular, if they'd been captured during

military operations, treatment was much harsher. Some might still be drafted into the army, though often with greater safeguards imposed. An imperial edict dealing with a force of Sciri captured by the Romans in 409, for instance, records that twenty-five years – that is, a generation – should pass before any of them could be recruited. The rest, again, became peasant cultivators, but on less favourable terms. Many of the Sciri of 409 were sold into slavery, and the rest distributed as unfree peasants (*coloni*), with the stipulation that they had to be moved to points outside the Balkans, where they had been captured. All immigrants became soldiers or peasants, then, but there were more and less pleasant ways of effecting it.²³

There is, however, another common denominator to all documented cases of licensed immigration into the Empire. Emperors never admitted immigrants on trust. They *always* made sure that they were militarily in control of proceedings, either through having defeated the would-be immigrants first, or by having sufficient force on hand to deal with any trouble. Constantius and the Limigantes provide a case in point. In 359, something went badly wrong. True to form, Ammianus puts it down to bad faith on the part of the Sarmatians, but the causes may have been more complex. Be that as it may, all hell broke loose at a crucial moment:

When the emperor was seen on the high tribunal and was already preparing to deliver a most mild address, intending to speak to [the Sarmatians] as future obedient subjects, one of their number struck with savage madness, hurling his shoe at the tribunal, shouted 'Marha, marha' (which is their warcry), and the rude crowd following him suddenly raised a barbarian banner and with savage howls rushed upon the emperor himself.

What happened next is very revealing:

Although the attack was so sudden that they were only partly armed, with a loud battlecry [the Roman forces] plunged into the bands of the savages . . . They butchered everything in their way, trampling under foot without mercy the living, as well as those dying or dead . . . The rebels were completely overthrown, some being slain, others fleeing in terror in all directions, and a part of them who hoped to save their lives by vain entreaties, were cut down by repeated strokes.

The Limigantes' acceptance on to Roman soil had been carefully negotiated before Constantius showed himself, so all should have been well. But when it wasn't, there were plenty of Roman troops to hand and it was the Limigantes who were wiped out.²⁴

This highlights a key element in the generally accepted account of what happened in 376 that just doesn't ring true. Valens, we are told, was filled with joy at the Goths' arrival on the Danube. But in 376 the Roman army was demonstrably not in charge of the situation, and when things started to go wrong after the crossing, order could not be restored. Lupicinus, whatever his personal culpability for the Goths' revolt, simply didn't have enough troops on hand. After the banquet, he immediately rushed his available forces into battle against the rebellious Goths and was soundly defeated.²⁵ In the absence of total military superiority, which was central to normal Roman *receptiones*, it is just not credible that Valens was anything like as happy about the arrival of the Goths on the Danube as the sources claim.

The shortage of Roman troops in the Balkans had a simple enough cause. In the summer of 376, Valens was deeply embroiled on his eastern front, and had been for some time. As we saw in Chapter 3, he had ended his war against Athanaric in 369 with a compromise, because he was needed in the east to deal with Persian ambitions in Armenia and Iberia. After 371, taking advantage of Persia's difficulties in its own far eastern territories, Valens had made some important gains, managing to put Roman nominees in control of these Caucasian territories. By 375, though, Shapur, Persian King of Kings, was back. Determined to hold firm, Valens sent three aggressive embassies in the summer of 376, which told him to back off or expect a fight. Such diplomatic posturing required appropriate military preparations, so that not only had Valens made haste to Antioch, the regional headquarters for Persian campaigns, but the vast majority of his mobile striking forces was in the east as well. When the Goths arrived on the Danube, therefore, Valens was already fully committed to an aggressive policy in the east, and it was bound to take him at least a year to extract his forces diplomatically, or even just to turn them around logistically.²⁶

For a while Valens probably still hoped that the Danube crisis could be managed in such a way as to allow him to pursue his Caucasian ambitions, perhaps even with the addition of some extra Gothic military manpower, as the sources report. Given how far the Danubian situation departed from normal Roman expectations of

control, however, we might also expect him to have been treating very carefully, wary of potential problems. And the available evidence shows that he was. As we noted earlier, one thing is clear: of the two Gothic groups who arrived at the Danube, only the Tervingi were admitted.²⁷ The Greuthungi were refused permission to enter the Empire, and such troops and naval craft as were available in the Balkans were placed opposite them to keep them north of the river. Valens did not, then, rush to accept every Goth he could find so as to build up his army and fill the treasury's coffers at one and the same time.

Let's also have a closer look at his relations with the Tervingi. No source describes the terms agreed with this group in any detail, and thanks to the rebellion, they were never fully implemented. The new relationship was certainly presented to the Roman public as a Gothic surrender – *editio* – but that in itself tells us little; both Constantine's and Valens' earlier treaties with the Tervingi were described as such when they involved quite different relationships (see pp. 72–6). Everything suggests that the agreement of 376 incorporated some unusual features, highly favourable to the Goths. To start with, they exercised an unusual degree of control over their place of settlement. In normal circumstances, the emperor decided where to place immigrants, tending to spread them out. In 376, it was agreed that the Tervingi should be settled only in Thrace, and this was their choice. The details of how the settlement was to be organized are unclear; in particular, we are left in the dark on the crucial issue of whether they were to be settled in clusters large enough to preserve their political and cultural identity. This would again have been highly unusual, but, given that they were able to choose their own settlement area, may well have been part of the agreement. Otherwise, we know only that hostages were taken, and an immediate draft of young men for the regular Roman army; and that the agreement envisaged the Goths possibly serving en masse as auxiliaries on particular campaigns, much as they had between 332 and 369. There were also some confidence-building measures. In particular, the Tervingi leadership declared itself willing to convert to Christianity.

The fact that the agreement was sold to its Roman audience as a surrender must not confuse the issue. In both its military and its diplomatic details it departed from Roman norms. The Tervingi extracted much better terms in 376 than those usually granted even to

immigrants being treated as friends. Lacking sufficient military clout on the Danube, Valens was forced to depart from tried and trusted Roman methods. We might expect him to have been wary about admitting even the Tervingi, therefore, and there are, in fact, strong hints that he was.²⁸

As we've seen, the main cause of the Tervingi's revolt was food shortages and black-marketeering beside the Danube. The Goths, it seems, spent autumn and part of winter 376/7 beside the river, and only moved on to Marcianople sometime in late winter or early spring. Even when the revolt got under way, they still had difficulty in finding food, because 'all the necessities of life had been taken to the strong cities, none of which the enemy even then attempted to besiege because of their complete ignorance of these and other operations of the kind'. This relates to the summer of 377, but long before that year's crops had ripened. The Romans, it would seem, had deliberately moved the harvest of 376 to fortified strongpoints which the Goths lacked the military technology to take. Feeding the hungry Tervingi was anyway a formidable task for the Roman state, given its bureaucratic limitations. It had to plan carefully enough for major military campaigns when its own troops needed feeding. The Goths, of course, had no means of growing their own food at this point, since the agreement hadn't yet got as far as land allocations. Once their stocks had been consumed, securing all other food supplies gave Valens a lever of control over them.

The emperor was also quick to negotiate military assistance from his western colleague, the emperor Gratian, son of his brother Valentinian I. Probably in 377 our old friend Themistius, orator, philosopher, senator of Constantinople and a close confidant of Valens, visited Rome. There he delivered his thirteenth oration. This speech, derivative and uninspired – perhaps delivered on the tenth anniversary of the emperor's accession, which fell in 377 – celebrated Gratian as the Platonic ideal of a ruler. Much more interesting than the speech is the fact that Themistius was present in the west at such an important moment. And, as he makes clear, his journey from Syria had been made at breakneck speed:

... my course was almost equal to the course of the sun, from the Tigris to Ocean [the Atlantic; i.e. the west]; it was an urgent journey, a flight over the surface of the earth, just as you

[Socrates] say Eros once hurried, with sleepless days following the nights. I lived my life on the road and under the open skies, sleeping on the ground and out of doors, with no bed to lie on, and no shoes to put on . . .³⁰

The pace he described here is much faster than you'd think the rather run-of-the-mill contents of the speech would demand, which suggests that his embassy had another, more urgent aim. The presence of some western troops, already available to the east for campaigning in the Balkans in summer 377, gives the clue. Such campaigning would have required prior negotiation sometime during winter 376/7, possibly even before the revolt of the Tervingi had broken out. It was this necessity that drove Themistius and his companions so relentlessly across land and sea. The ambassadors were charged with negotiating a joint imperial response to the Gothic problem that had suddenly appeared on Valens' doorstep.

A note of caution on the eastern emperor's part too is suggested by the most mysterious of all the events that were unfolding at this time beside the Danube. As food shortages worsened, and the Goths' hostility grew, Lupicinus moved the Tervingi on to his regional headquarters at Marcianople, as we noted. But to supervise the process, he was obliged to use the forces that had previously been keeping out the Greuthungi. The Tervingi did eventually move, but the redeployment of the Roman forces allowed the Greuthungi to cross the river on to imperial territory. Lupicinus, as commander, must have been getting desperate – clearly, the situation was spiralling out of control. Ammianus reports that, to cap it all, the Tervingi moved only slowly towards Marcianople, so as to allow the Greuthungi to catch up with them. (The Greuthungi may have crossed the Danube slightly more to the east than the Tervingi, at Sacidava or Axiopolis (map 6).) When the Tervingi were about 15 kilometres from their destination, Lupicinus invited their leaders to dinner. Ammianus describes the party:

Having invited Alavivus and Fritigern to a dinner party, Lupicinus posted soldiers against the main body of the barbarians and kept them at a distance from the walls of the town . . . Great wrangling arose between the inhabitants and those who were shut out, which finally reached a point where fighting was inevitable. Whereupon the barbarians . . . killed and despoiled a great troop of soldiers. When Lupicinus learned by a secret message that this

had happened . . . he put to death all the attendants of the two leaders, who as a guard of honour and to ensure their safety were waiting for them in front of the general's quarters. When the [Goths] who were besieging the walls heard this news, in their resentment they gradually increased their number to avenge their kings, who, as they thought, had been detained by force . . . And since Fritigern was quickwitted and feared that he might be held with the rest as a hostage, he cried out that they [the Romans] would have to fight with heavy loss of life, unless he himself were allowed to go out with his companions to quiet the people . . . And when this request was granted, they all departed.³¹

It is difficult to know precisely what happened. On the face of it, the botched attack was the result of misunderstanding and panic, but banquet hijacks were a standard tool of Roman frontier management.

Removing dangerous or potentially dangerous leaders was an excellent means of spreading confusion amongst opponents. Ammianus describes four other occasions over a span of just twenty-four years when Roman commanders made dinner invitations an opportunity for kidnap. One of these four was the unauthorized initiative of a local commander, but the other three resulted from direct imperial orders. In one case, a commander on the Rhine was given a sealed letter, which he was not to open unless he saw the Alamannic leader in question on the Roman side of the river. When this happened, and he did, he was instructed to shunt him off to Spain. Lupicinus, I suspect, was in receipt of similarly contingent orders. Valens, still at Antioch, could not be consulted at every turn – requests for orders from his Danubian commanders would have had a turn-around time of weeks. So Lupicinus' instructions with regard to the Tervingi must have left considerable room for personal initiative; all the same, I don't believe that he would have been let loose on the Gothic problem without careful guidance about what to do in a variety of foreseeable scenarios. The arrival of a huge number of unsubdued Goths in Roman territory at a point when the main Roman army was mobilized elsewhere, was much too potentially dangerous not to have been thought through. Lupicinus had been told, I suspect, that if things looked as if they might be getting out of hand, then he should do what he could to disrupt the Goths – and hijacking enemy leaders, as already mentioned, was a standard Roman

reflex. But it was Lupicinus' call. In the event, he went for that worst of all possible worlds: first one thing, then the other, with neither stratagem whole-heartedly pursued. Instead of a continued if uneasy peace or a leaderless opposition, he found himself facing an uneasy revolt under an established leader.³²

Both common sense – would you be pleased to see chaos descend on a second front while you are heavily engaged on a first? – and comparison with other cases of licensed migration into the Roman Empire make it clear that Valens could not have been nearly so pleased to see huge numbers of Goths arrive on the Danube as our sources, however unanimously, report. As we have seen, imperial ideology required all barbarians to be shown to be subservient, and whatever the panicking going on behind the scenes in 376, the emperor's policy had to be presented to his taxpayers as a freely chosen strategy that would benefit the Empire. Ammianus offers us a strong hint here. His account refers to the input of 'learned flatterers' (*eruditus adulatoribus*) into Valens' Gothic policy.³³ This immediately brings to mind Themistius, who did such a good job for Valens on the peace of 369. He was with the emperor in Syria in the summer of 376, before his sudden dash westwards, and I suspect that a speech such as that of 369 was one of the ways whereby he convinced the east Roman court that, contrary to all appearances, letting in a horde of untamed Goths was actually a jolly good idea. The unanimity of our sources, then, reflects the propaganda that the emperor used to justify his policy, not the real reasoning behind it.

The Huns had thrown the Roman Empire and a large number of Goths into a new and unprecedentedly close relationship. The emperor certainly didn't desire this relationship: not, at least, in the form it took. The Goths too had their doubts and hesitations. Their decision to seek asylum inside the Empire was not taken lightly. When the majority of the Tervingi broke with Athanaric, they had done so at a large gathering where the issues were debated at length.³⁴ You can understand their wavering. Moving into the territory of such a powerful neighbour was no easy decision. Given the efficiency of the cross-border telegraph, they probably knew that Valens was currently overstretched on the Danube because of the war with Persia. The emperor might be willing to grant concessions for the moment, but there could be no guarantee that his attitude might not harden later. It's hardly surprising, therefore, if the Goths were trying to think

ahead: to prepare themselves to deal with the power of the Empire in the longer term as well as now.

Although the Romans treated them quite differently, the Tervingi and Greuthungi remained closely in touch. Hence, as already noted, when the Tervingi were forced by Lupicinus' troops to move on to Marcianople, they were already aware that the Greuthungi had crossed the river and so slowed their pace.³⁵ The Tervingi were entering the lion's den and, even if apparently receiving more favourable treatment than the Greuthungi, they had every interest in forming a united front with as many Goths as possible against the Empire's overwhelming superiority in both manpower and resources. By so doing, of course, they broke at least the spirit of their agreement with Valens. But if the emperor could find ways of rewriting the agreement of 376 for the longer term, then so could the Goths.³⁶

And this, it seems to me, is the real story. Both the Goths and the Romans had been thrown by the Huns into a new and more intense relationship. Neither side trusted the other, and neither was totally committed to the agreement negotiated – when both were under duress – in 376. That this initial agreement failed to hold cannot really have surprised anyone. The way was now clear for a test of military strength, upon whose outcome would hang the nature of a more durable settlement between the immigrant Goths and the Roman state.

The Battle of Hadrianople

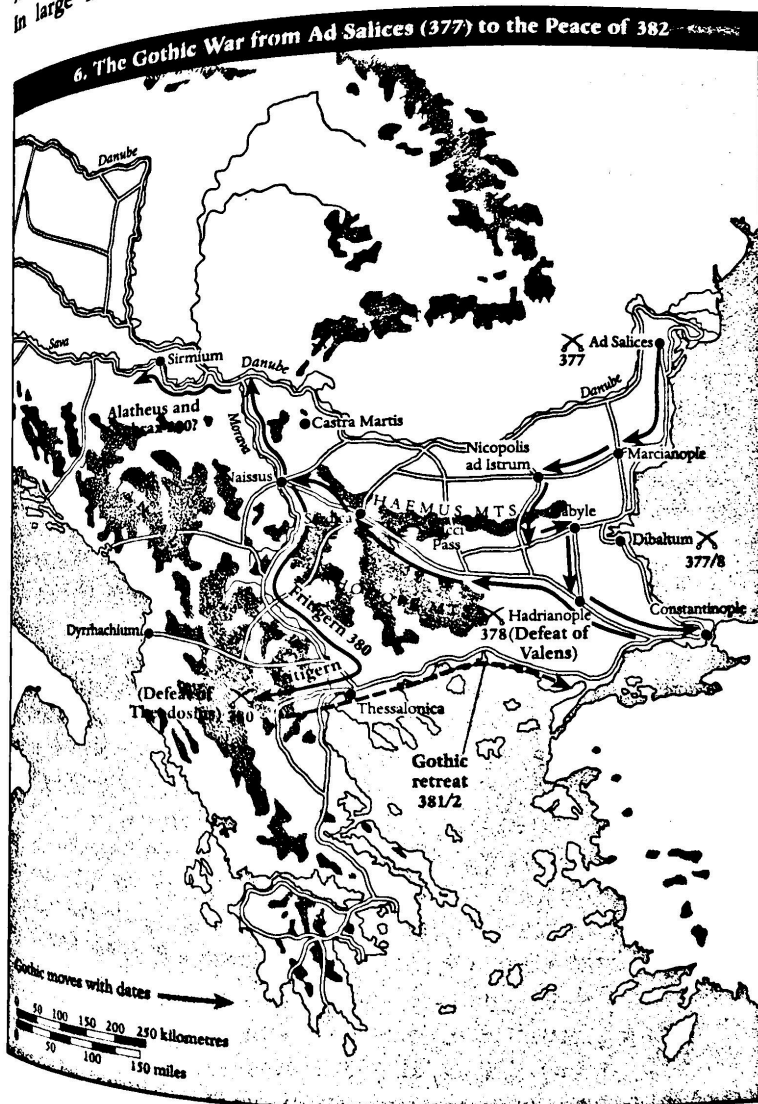
HOSTILITIES OPENED ON the morning after Lupicinus' fatal banquet. The return of Fritigern and the violence of the night before prompted a first round of pillaging in the immediate vicinity of Marcianople. In response, Lupicinus gathered what men he could and advanced to the Gothic camp, about 15 kilometres outside the city. His force was quickly overwhelmed – few, apart from Lupicinus himself, managed to escape. Sometime in late winter or spring of 377, war began in earnest and was to last no fewer than six campaigning seasons before peace was restored on 3 October 382.³⁷ The action of the first two years, up to the battle of Hadrianople, can be followed in considerable detail in the narrative of Ammianus Marcellinus (which is not to say that he tells us everything that we want to know). After the battle, the sources become thinner. What is very clear, however, is that the entire

war – all six seasons' worth – was confined to the Balkan provinces of the Roman Empire. This is a landscape that has been fought over many times in history, and its very particular geography has always dictated the nature of the action.

The northern part of the peninsula is roughly rectangular, broader to the north than the south, and to the west than the east (map 6), its salient physical feature being its mountains. To the east, the Stara Planina (or Haemus Mountains) rise to rounded summits averaging 750 metres; the highest peak reaches 2,376, while the more rugged Rhodopes are a touch higher with many peaks at over 2,000 metres. Further west, running north-south, are the Dinaric Alps. Over time, their limestone has eroded into sharp crags and pockmarked hillsides, often covered with prickly, unpleasant scrub: the characteristic Karst landscape of the western Balkans. Alongside the mountains lie three wide plains: the Danubian Plain to the north, the Thracian in the south-east, and the Macedonian between the Rhodopes and the Dinarics. Another characteristic feature of the peninsula is its many alluvial upland basins, where rainwater and snowmelt erosion have built up layers of fertile soil in pockets between the mountain peaks.

The nature of this landscape has shaped the region's history. Most obviously, the plains and upland basins define discrete sections of cultivable land, where there are likely to be concentrations of population. Many of the mountain zones are extremely rugged, which, especially combined with the region's harsh winters, has limited long-distance communications to only two main routes. North-south, the key highway runs through the Morava and Vardar river valleys connecting the Danube via modern Skopje (the Roman Scupi) to the Aegean at Thessalonica. North-west to south-east, a second important route starts again at the Morava valley, but turns left at Niš (the Roman Naissus) to work its way through fertile upland basins past the Bulgarian capital Sofia (the Roman Serdica), then over the Succa Pass to connect with the rich upland plain of the Sredna Gora and on to the Thracian Plain. In the Roman period, this was a military trunk road. Landscape also dictates communications more locally. The Rhodopes are extremely difficult to cross from north-east to south-west, for instance, and movement north and south through the Haemus mountains is channelled through just five major passes: the Iskar valley in the west, the Trojan and Shipka Passes in the centre, and the Kotel and Riski further east.

When the Goths crossed the Danube in AD 376, they entered a Roman world that had imposed itself on this landscape for over 300 years in the north, and nearer 500 in the south, where by 146 BC Macedonia had been conquered and turned into a Roman province. In large measure, the Romans worked with the landscape, rather



than against it, but there was one main exception. Aside from the two natural axes of long-distance communication, they forced two additional east-west routes through the Balkans. In the south, and constructed as early as 130 BC, the famous Via Egnatia followed the Aegean coastline from Constantinople to Thessalonica – an easy enough route – but then struck determinedly through the peaks and troughs of the Dinarics to reach the Adriatic at Durres (the Roman *Dyrhachium*). Further north, at the end of the first century AD, the Roman military engineers carved a road through sheer solid rock at the Iron Gates, where the River Danube cuts through the southern extension of the Carpathian Mountains, to connect the Lower and Middle Danube regions. The Balkans was the junction between east and west, and the Empire didn't skimp on its highways. Even as late as 376, the Balkans' prime function, viewed from a central imperial perspective, was to provide a bridge between the two halves of Empire; and many resources were devoted to maintaining the roads, and the towns and way-stations along them. These both protected travellers and provided the logistic support that made possible the high-speed connections recorded in the papers of Theophanes (see pp. 104–7).

The imperatives of Empire also dictated that central funds be spent in two other areas of the Balkans. The Danube Plain north of the Haemus Mountains had been an imperial frontier for three centuries by the time the Huns were creating mayhem north of the Black Sea. Early on, major legionary bases had been established at Oescus and Novae. By the fourth century, the regional headquarters at Marcianople, whose walls enclosed an area of 70 hectares, oversaw the operation of the frontier zone, and a series of larger and smaller fortresses guarded the river line and studded the countryside behind it. Many of the larger civilian settlements were also walled by this date, and had subsidiary military functions. Further south, political rather than military imperatives dictated expenditure. In the south-east of the peninsula, the emperor Constantine refounded the ancient Greek polis, or city-state, of Byzantium as Constantinople, which, by the third quarter of the fourth century had become in every respect a new imperial capital. Endowed with mighty walls and beautiful public buildings, the city had also seen massive investment on infrastructure: harbour facilities and granaries that could deal with grain fleets from Egypt, and aqueducts that drained the hills over 100 kilometres away to service the burgeoning population of a naturally rather arid site. It was

a huge centre of economic demand, and, in addition to all the imperial funds spent on it, had many inhabitants with money to burn. The rich needed both houses inside the city and cooler retreats in the country, as well as services of all kinds. In the fourth century, the south-eastern Balkans were booming as never before, and Constantinopolitan cash spilled over into the nearby communities of the Thracian Plain.

The Balkans were also host to other Roman communities, whose Romanness was the product of a more organic, long-term development. Some Roman cities sat on ancient foundations. Many of the communities of the Adriatic coast had a long pre-Roman past, and this was even more true of Macedonia and the Black Sea littoral, where cities like Thessalonica, Philippopolis, Anchialus and Odessus had classical Greek roots. These areas boasted both proper Roman cities complete with the standard repertoire of public buildings, and a flourishing countryside, cheerfully exploited to good effect by a landowning class living in luxurious villas. 'Proper' Roman life could also be found in other parts of the peninsula. In the fourth century, the Danubian Plain was still dotted with Roman towns and villas. In part, these communities can be viewed as a spin-off from Roman defence spending. Many of the town councils of the region were populated with the descendants of legionary veterans, and many villa estates had their origins in the land grants the state customarily made to retired soldiers. Many fortunes were made servicing the consumer demand triggered by soldiers' pay. But Roman life in the region had generated its own momentum, and its monuments are too substantial to be explained solely by state spending. The same was true of the central corridor from Philippopolis through the Sredna Gora and Serdica into the Morava valley. Here again, state spending had certainly kick-started things, but the Pax Romana had allowed an authentic Roman life to develop, and in most of the upland basins as well. The twin obstacles of mountain and climate that had resulted in far fewer cities and a correspondingly lower percentage of intensely worked land than in many other areas of the Empire, had not prevented the Balkans from developing into a properly Roman world.³⁸

This was the panorama that faced the Goths at the outbreak of war. Everything suggests that the Greuthungi joined in the hostilities immediately.³⁹ Established at this point in the vicinity of Marcianople, they found themselves in the middle of the belt of Roman military installations that guarded the Danube line. Some layers showing

damage, datable to the war years, have been found in the remains of smaller forts, but both written and archaeological evidence confirm that Ammianus was right to emphasize that the Gothic leader Fritigern 'kept peace with walls'.⁴⁰ It would have been suicide for the Goths to assault these Roman frontier forts, many of which had been redesigned at the start of the fourth century with huge U-shaped bastions equipped to carry the brutally effective Roman wall artillery. The garrisons were pretty numerous: twenty-three units in the province of Scythia and twenty-seven in Lower Moesia, with particular concentrations at Noviodunum, Axiopolis, Troesmis, Transmarisca, Durostorum and Novae (map 6). These garrison troops, however, were primarily trained to patrol and deal with small-scale raids, not to provide mobile forces for large-scale field operations, and Lupicinus had anyway drawn off much of their manpower to create his scratch force. In defeating Lupicinus, therefore, the Goths had already neutralized the only mobile Roman force in the region, and the remaining garrisons faced certain destruction if they ventured out piecemeal. These installations posed no immediate threat to the Goths and could be safely ignored.⁴¹

Besides, the Goths had more immediate concerns. They had, of course, plenty of scores to settle. As we noted earlier, a winter in the open on the Danubian Plain, where even average daytime temperatures do not climb above zero in January and February, combined with the Romans' black-marketeering, had infuriated them. There was also the pressing need to secure food supplies. The Goths may well have brought with them at least some of the harvest of 376, and the Romans had been supplying them with a certain amount of food in the meantime, but there was no possibility of planting crops for the current year. After plundering easy targets in the immediate vicinity of Marcianople, therefore, Gothic eyes turned to the great highways running from the Danube towards the metropolitan splendour and economic boom that was the south-east Roman Balkans.

Goths next appear in the vicinity of Hadrianople, already south of the Haemus Mountains, and some two hundred kilometres south of Marcianople. The total defeat of Lupicinus' force there had robbed the Romans of any chance, at this point, of holding the Haemus barrier against them. A much smaller force of Goths was stationed at Hadrianople. Led by Sueridas and Colias, it had long been part of the Roman army. When news of the revolt further north reached the city, trouble broke out between the citizens and these Goths, and they

threw in their lot with Fritigern. It was at this moment, Ammianus records, that Fritigern 'advised them to attack and devastate the rich and fruitful parts of the country, which were still without protectors and could be pillaged without any danger'. The outcome, from the Roman point of view, was frightful:

[The Goths] advancing cautiously spread over every quarter of Thrace, while their prisoners or those who surrendered to them pointed out the rich villages, especially those in which it was said that abundant supplies of food were to be found . . . With such guides, nothing that was not inaccessible and out of the way remained untouched. For without distinction of age or sex, all places were ablaze with slaughter and great fires; babies were torn from the very breasts of their mothers and slain, matrons and widows whose husbands had been killed before their eyes were carried off, boys of tender or adult age were dragged away over the dead bodies of their parents. Many older men, lamenting that they had lived long enough after losing their possessions and their beautiful women, were led into exile with their arms pinioned behind their backs, weeping over the glowing ashes of their ancestral homes.⁴²

The Goths were hungry and had many resentments to burn off; the people of the Thracian Plain suddenly found themselves in the front line, and paid the price for everything that had happened during that winter on the Danube. Note, too, the willingness of some of the Roman population to assist the Goths in their plundering. Some perhaps helped them out of fear, but there was many an oppressed peasant with his own scores to settle. The Pax Romana did not benefit all Romans equally.

The Roman response to these disasters came in the form of a first consignment of troops from the east. Valens sent one of his chief advisers, the general Victor, to sue for peace with Persia on whatever terms he could get; and in the meantime he detached some troops from Armenia under the generals Trajanus and Profuturus, who reached the Balkans in the summer of 377. Their impact was substantial. The Goths quickly withdrew north of the Haemus Mountains. At this point, too, the first fruits of Valens' hasty diplomacy materialized. A smallish force from the western Empire under the command of Richomeres hastened over the Succus Pass to join

Trajanus and Profuturus. Reinforced, the Romans advanced north of the Haemus range as far as the Gothic wagon laager, which, Ammianus tells us, was situated at a place called *Ad Salices*, 'town by the willows' (map 6).⁴³ The Romans decided to risk battle; and the Goths were up for a fight, once the last of their foraging parties returned. Only Ammianus describes the encounter, and his account is far from graphic. About half of it is devoted to a rhetorical description of the dead and dying, and he tells us nothing of the numbers or dispositions of the two sides. In overall terms, however, the battle was clearly a bloody draw. At one point, the Roman left wing gave way, but reserves rescued the situation and the fighting ended at nightfall. The Romans had suffered grievous losses, but so too had the Goths, and afterwards they stayed inside their wagon circle for an entire week. Summer was at this point giving way to autumn, so we are probably in September 377.⁴⁴

The Romans made excellent use of the respite. The battle had cost them dear, but for the moment they had retaken the initiative, for the first time since Lupicinus' defeat. Heavily outnumbered as they were, the available forces had no prospect of defeating the Goths; so instead, quick to exploit one of the features of the Balkan landscape, they fortified the passes through the Haemus Mountains. Marcianople itself commanded the eastern end of the range, so presumably a substantial garrison was left there. The rest of the troops were dispersed to block the five main routes south. The plan was simple, as Ammianus explains: 'They doubtless hoped that the dangerous mass of enemies, crowded together between the Hister [Danube] and the waste places, and finding no way out, would perish from lack of food.' It was also well laid. Some of the passes through the Haemus Mountains are quite broad, but they are all high. Exactly 1,500 years later, in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877, the Russians sent a flying column south from the Danube to seize the Shipka Pass, which leads through the central Haemus range to Hadrianople and the main road to Constantinople/Istanbul. They successfully captured it, but weren't reinforced, and for five days (21–25 August) 4,400 Russians had to face the assault of 30–40,000 Turks under Suleiman Pasha. At the end of the battle there were three and a half thousand Russian casualties, but they had held the pass, and over 10,000 dead Turks littered the hillside. For two months after the encounter at 'the town by the willows', the Romans were as successful as the Russians would be:

Since everything that could serve as food throughout the lands of Scythia and Moesia [the two Roman provinces north of the Haemus] had been used up, the barbarians, driven alike by ferocity and hunger, strove with all their might to break out ... After many attempts, they were overwhelmed by the vigour of our men, who strongly opposed them amid the rugged heights.

The Romans were desperately trying to buy time, hoping that the arrival of winter would bring the campaigning to an end and give Valens and Gratian time to bring reinforcements to the Balkans by springtime.

Their hopes, however, were misplaced. 'Just as autumn was turning to winter',⁴⁵ intelligence reports came in that the Goths had found new allies. A force of Huns and Alans had been recruited to the Gothic cause by promises of booty. When he heard this, the Roman commander decided that the passes could no longer be held. As soon as one pass was forced, the soldiers holding the others would be cut off and stand little chance against the numerically superior Goths. He lost no time in pulling back his troops. For the most part the retreat worked, but one Roman detachment was caught in the open at a major crossroads near Dibaltum south of the Haemus Mountains, and seems to have been exterminated.⁴⁶ The Goths, now with Hunnic and Alan allies (who need not have been very numerous to swing the delicate balance of power back in the Goths' favour), were free again to rampage south of the Haemus Mountains. They did so, to telling effect, in dispersed groups throughout the winter of 377/8, 'filling [as Ammianus tells us] the whole country as far as [the province of] Rhodope and the strait which separates the two great seas [the Hellespont] with a most foul confusion of robbery, murder, bloodshed, fires, and shameful violation of the bodies of freemen.'

This time the raiding spread wider and lasted longer, but there was plenty to occupy the Goths on the rich Thracian Plain, and the damage extended no further west than the eastern slopes of the Rhodope Mountains. Ammianus treats us to another lengthy account of Roman misery rather than giving any precise details, but other sources tell us that the Goths came close to the walls of Constantinople, where they were finally driven off by Arab auxiliary forces in Roman service. The Arabs' habit of drinking the blood from the slit throats of their dead opponents discouraged the Goths from pursuing the argument further,

but there were not enough Roman troops or allies available to take broader countermeasures. Until reinforcements started to arrive from the east, the Goths had plenty of time for some productive looting. None of the damage shows up in the archaeological record. All the main excavated late Roman villas of the region, north and south of the Haemus Mountains, were abandoned at this point, most of them showing an extensive destruction layer.⁴⁷

Sometime early in 378, the bulk of Valens' field forces began to arrive from the east. The army gathered slowly in the vicinity of Constantinople, as its units arrived from Mesopotamia and the Caucasus. It is probably wrong to imagine this happening very early in the year, since a Roman field army, like its counterparts everywhere until recent times, could not begin operations until the grass was growing sufficiently to feed the animals pulling its baggage and heavy equipment. Valens himself didn't arrive in Constantinople until 30 May, and this was probably more or less the point at which large-scale operations first became feasible. He received from the capital's population a far from warm welcome, and there was some rioting. Constantinople had been a hotbed of resistance to Valens during an attempted usurpation at the start of his reign, and there were also religious issues afoot. In addition, of course, many of the richer citizens would have recently suffered financial and other losses in the Gothic raiding. Once assembled after the long march from the east, his army rested in preparation for battle. Valens was an emperor with a great deal to prove.

THE ROMAN PLANS for 378 were well laid. By granting major concessions in the Caucasus, Valens had bought peace from the Persians and could shift most of his mobile forces back to the Balkans. Negotiations had continued with Gratian: the western emperor had promised to come in person to Thrace, bringing with him the western field army. The best troops from both halves of the Empire were thus gathering in order to put the Goths in their place. No source defines the precise aim of the joint campaign, but it is pretty easy to guess. The emperors were assembling enough troops to win a resounding victory; then it would be business as usual. Imperial invincibility would be seen to be re-established, and of those Goths who remained on Roman territory some would die in amphitheatres across the Empire, some would be drafted into the army, and the majority widely distributed as unfree labour.

But in the fourth century, as in any other, 'no plan survives first contact with the enemy'. In this case, the enemy took an unexpected turn. As Gratian was collecting his expeditionary army in the west, it became obvious, from the other side of the frontier, that gaps were appearing in the Roman defensive line-up on the Upper Rhine and Upper Danube. The news was confirmed by a Roman soldier of Germanic origin returning home to his people the Lentienses, a branch of the Alamanni, who inhabited the Alpine foothills on the frontiers of Roman Raetia (modern Switzerland). In February 378, when Gratian had already sent many troops east to Pannonia in the Middle Danube region for the upcoming campaign, the Lentienses crossed the upper reaches of the frozen Rhine. This initial assault was repulsed, but Gratian received intelligence that it was merely an opening gambit, and that much more substantial attacks, by many thousands of Alamanni, were being planned. The emperor and his advisers decided that the Goths would have to wait. Part of the expeditionary army was pulled back west from Pannonia and more troops drafted in from Gaul, enough to allow Gratian to launch a strong pre-emptive assault. He was determined to secure his rear before turning east, and pressed home the assault to the point of a lengthy siege against the chief group of suspects, who were holed up on a mountain top. Slowly but surely the campaign ground on until the Lentienses surrendered and the ex-Roman soldier was punished.⁴⁸

All of this made perfect sense from Gratian's perspective, but placed Valens in an impossible situation. He had arrived in Constantinople on 30 May and left the city twelve days later, advancing to an imperial villa at Melanthias, 50 kilometres further into Thrace, where his troops were concentrating. Pay and supplies were distributed and attempts made to bolster the troops' morale in preparation for the campaign. But Gratian failed to appear. And while Valens waited, the Goths were far from idle. Their foraging parties continued to operate and their main forces were distributed between Nicopolis and Beroea, thus controlling both ends of the strategic Shipka Pass. The Goths, it would seem, were keeping their options open: they might move on north, or south through the Haemus Mountains. At this point, Valens' generals got wind of a detached Gothic raiding party in the vicinity of Hadrianople, and rushed a column forward to ambush it. The night attack was a success, and prompted Gothic countermeasures. Frangon called in all his raiding parties and moved the entire main

body, wagons and all, south of the Haemus Mountains to Cabyle - then further south still, on to the Thracian Plain proper, to avoid the danger of further ambushes. The endgame was fast approaching. The mass of Goths were now north of Hadrianople on the main road from Cabyle. Valens was south of Hadrianople, with his army collected and rested. Gratian, however, was still nowhere to be seen, and summer was dragging on.

Valens joined his army outside Constantinople on 12 June. But July came and went, and still no Gratian. The eastern army had been sitting around for the best part of two months, and nothing had happened except for the ambush of one Gothic raiding party. The troops were becoming restive and morale was ebbing away. The instead of Gratian's army, a letter arrived minutely detailing the victories the western emperor had won over the Alamanni. He was, he promised, still coming; but it was already August, late on in the season, and Gratian's successes touched a nerve. Valens' patience was fast approaching breaking-point. Then came news of the Goths' advance south towards Hadrianople. Intelligence reports put the Gothic numbers at only 10,000 fighting men, many fewer than Valens was expecting. This figure was based, I believe, on the misconception that only Fritigern's Tervingi, and not the Tervingi and Greuthungi combined, were nearing Hadrianople at this point. Jealous of Gratian's success, Valens was deeply tempted. Was this an opportunity to win a morale- and esteem-boosting victory over a significant number of the enemy? Opinion among his generals was divided. Some urged boldness; others counselled waiting for Gratian. Provisionally, the hawks won. Trumpets sounded the advance, and Valens' army moved in battle order up to Hadrianople, then constructed a defended marching camp (temporary earth ramparts) outside the city.

Now more letters arrived from Gratian. He was on the move, and his advance guard had kept open the vital Succus Pass between the Haemus and Rhodope Mountains, so that he could move straight down the great military road to Hadrianople. Some of Valens' generals continued to argue for delay, therefore, but as Ammianus reports, 'the fatal insistence of the emperor prevailed, supported by the flattering opinion of some of his courtiers, who urged him to make all haste so that Gratian might not have a share in the victory which, as they represented, was already all but won.'

On the night of 8/9 August, with the two sides now in close

proximity, Fritigern sent a Christian priest to Valens as a peace envoy, but the emperor would have none of it. At dawn, the Roman army hastened on to the north of Hadrianople, leaving its baggage and a suitable guard in the marching camp; the imperial treasury and other more valuable items were left inside the city walls. All morning the Romans marched north, until, at about two in the afternoon, the Gothic wagon circle ('as if turned by a lathe', as Ammianus puts it) came into view. As the Roman army deployed, two further sets of Gothic peace envoys arrived. Valens dithered. He was in the process of arranging an exchange of hostages when two regiments on the Roman right wing, without having been ordered to do so, surged forward to attack. After months of waiting, battle had finally begun in earnest.⁴⁰

Accounts of ancient battles are never all you would like them to be. Ancient audiences wanted to hear about great deeds of derring-do, not military science. In the case of Hadrianople, in fact, Ammianus presents us with one of his best efforts at battle depiction. The Goths had drawn up their wagons in a circle to reinforce their battle line; the Romans deployed with a mixture of cavalry and infantry on each wing, and the bulk of the heavy infantry in the centre. Although the left wing had not fully formed when the battle began, it seemed, at first, to be making the most progress. It pushed the oncoming Goths right back to their wagon circle and was on the verge of carrying even that by storm, when disaster struck. As the Roman left wing surged forward, Gothic cavalry under Alatheus and Saphrax, combined with some Alans (presumably the ones with whom an alliance had been made the previous autumn), 'dashed out as a thunderbolt does near high mountains and threw into confusion all those whom they could find in the way of their sudden onslaught and quickly slew them'. With both Tervingi and Greuthungi confronting him on the battlefield, Valens was now exposed to a far larger enemy force than he had imagined. He had given battle on mistaken intelligence, and the Goths had achieved complete tactical surprise.

Ammianus is not absolutely clear about what happened next, but the Gothic cavalry seems to have smashed into the Roman left wing. It was certainly from the left wing that the disaster unfolded. First, its cavalry support was dispersed and then its main force was overwhelmed - caught, perhaps, between the defenders of the wagon circle and the onrushing Gothic cavalry. The destruction of the left wing in

turn exposed the Roman centre to a massive flanking attack. Since the Romans were in their customary close order – in the fourth century they often still operated the *testudo* (tortoise) wall-of-shields formation – the effect was calamitous:

The foot-soldiers thus stood unprotected, and their companies were so crowded together that hardly anyone could pull out his sword or draw back his arm ... arrows, whirling death from every side, always found their mark with fatal effect since they could not be seen beforehand nor guarded against ... and in the press of ranks no room for retreat could be gained anywhere, and the increased crowding left no opportunity for retreat.

Indeed, the heavy Roman infantry regiments of the centre were so closely pressed together that they had no hope of manoeuvring to bring the weight of their weaponry to bear. Their normal tactical advantages in arms, armour and training now counted for nothing.

The troops were also reaching exhaustion point. Valens had pushed them into battle, without rest or food, after an eight-hour march in the August sun; on the Thracian Plain, the average midday temperature at this time of year approaches 30 degrees Celsius. The Goths had turned the temperature up even further by taking advantage of a favourable wind to light huge fires, which were now pouring smoke and heat down on their opponents. After fierce fighting, the main Roman battle line eventually broke and fled. The result, as always in such circumstances, was a massacre. Army and emperor perished together. What exactly happened to Valens, nobody knew for sure. His body was never found. Some said that, wounded, he was taken to a farmhouse which the Goths surrounded and burned to the ground when arrows were fired at them from an upper window, and that one of his attendants escaped to tell the story. Ammianus doesn't seem to have believed this account, although it is widely reported. Perhaps the emperor was stranded and simply cut down in anonymous fashion somewhere on the battlefield.

Valens' gamble had failed. The emperor himself was dead, and the Goths, against all expectations, had won a stunning victory, destroying in the process the best army of the eastern Roman Empire. How many Roman troops died that day is hotly disputed. Ammianus tells us that thirty-five officers of tribune rank (approximately equal to regimental commander) died, along with two-thirds of the troops. From a com-

plete listing of the eastern army dating from about 395, about twenty years after the event, we also know that sixteen elite regiments suffered such severe losses that they were never reconstituted. But none of this gives us a total figure, since we don't know the size of the original army and a number of the dead tribunes will have been staff officers rather than unit commanders. Some historians think that Valens brought with him upwards of 30,000 men – 20,000 dead at Hadrianople, then. Even given the peace deal with Persia, however, the emperor could not afford to denude the east of all its troops and we have to remember that he was expecting reinforcements from Gratian. My own opinion is that Valens brought more like fifteen thousand men to the Balkans in 378, and was looking for a similar number from Gratian. Between them, these forces would have enjoyed a 1.5:1–2:1 advantage over the Goths, which ought to have been more than enough. But because of the faulty intelligence report, Valens gave battle at Hadrianople, in my view, with perhaps a slight numerical disadvantage instead of, as he thought, a 1.5:1 advantage over just the Tervingi. His force was undone by the Goths' extra numbers, but above all by the huge tactical surprise they brought off. If I'm right, Roman losses on 9 August will have been more in the region of 10,000 men.⁵⁰

But in an important sense, the quarrel over numbers is academic. The central point is that Valens' jealousy of Gratian, and his impatience, had undone the Empire. In Ammianus' view, the Romans had known no such defeat since the battle of Cannae in 216 BC, when Hannibal had annihilated a whole imperial army. Victory left the Goths masters not only of the battlefield, but of the entire Balkans. Roman military invincibility had been overturned in a single afternoon, and Gratian could only look on helplessly from the other side of the Succi Pass, about 300 kilometres distant, as the triumphant Goths rampaged through the southern Balkans. Against all the odds, and despite their opponents' advantages in equipment and training, the Goths had triumphed and the path to Constantinople lay open. As Ammianus reports, 'From [Hadrianople] they hastened in rapid march to Constantinople, greedy for its vast heaps of treasure, marching in square formations for fear of ambushes, and intending to make many mighty efforts to destroy the famous city.'

Valens was dead, his army destroyed; the eastern Roman Empire was there for the taking.

'Peace in Our Time'

I'VE NEVER QUITE known whether to believe the vignette with which Ammianus, on almost the last page of his history, takes his leave of the Gothic war. Having shown us the victorious Goths preparing to besiege Constantinople, he then feeds us the following image:

[The Goths'] courage was broken when they beheld the oblong circuit of the walls, the blocks of houses covering a vast space, the beauties of the city beyond their reach, the vast population inhabiting it, and the strait nearby that separates the Black Sea from the Aegean. So they destroyed the stores of military equipment they were preparing . . . and spread everywhere across the northern provinces.¹¹

It is almost too good to be true: a perfect metaphor for the entire war. And you have to remember that, by the time he was writing, in the early 390s, Ammianus knew the outcome of the war even if he chose to end his account in 378. Victory over Valens at Hadrianople was just enough to give the Goths a glimpse of the prize that was Constantinople; but that in turn was enough to convince them that they hadn't the slightest chance of capturing it.

The Goths faced three overwhelming disadvantages that made it impossible for them to defeat the Roman Empire outright. First, even if, taking the maximum conceivable figure, we reckon that there were 200,000 of them in all, with the capacity to produce an army of 40-50,000 men - although I do think this figure too high - this would still have been rather paltry compared with the grand sum of imperial resources. The Empire's army totalled, as we've seen, 300-600,000, and its population was in excess of 70 million (a minimum figure). In a fight to the death, there could be only one winner, and the cannier Goths - some of whom among the Tervingi had travelled the breadth of Roman Asia Minor to fight in the Persian wars - were perfectly well aware of this. Fritigern's peace overtures to Valens before Hadrianople show that he, for one, never lost his sense of perspective. He told Valens that, if the imperial army put on a decent enough show of martial intimidation, he would be able to persuade his followers to reel in their military ardour and make a compromise peace.¹² The *quid pro quo* that Fritigern had in mind for himself, interestingly enough,

was that Valens should recognize him as king of all the now allied Goths, thus cutting out Alatheus and Saphrax, not to mention all his other would-be rivals among the Tervingi. As it turned out, the imperial army failed to deliver its part of the deal, perishing virtually to a man. But, a bit like Pearl Harbor, when there is a fundamental mismatch in resources and capacity one shock victory at the beginning of a struggle can't change its course.

To this fundamental problem we can add two more. First, there is no record of the Goths taking any major fortified imperial centre during the six years of war. Conditions clearly became fraught in the Roman Danubian communities that were cut off from the centre for extended periods; we don't know, for instance, if and when they were able to plant crops. But no city was ever taken by siege.¹³ This meant that the Goths were unable to get their hands on stocks of weapons and supplies, or to set themselves up in a defended stronghold of their own. The second problem arrived on the back of the first. The Gothic force at large south of the Danube between 377 and 382 wasn't just an army, but an entire population group: men, women and children, dragging themselves and their possessions around in a huge wagon train. With no secure lands available to them for food production, and unable to break into fortified storehouses, the Goths were forced to pillage in order to eat, and, because so much food was required, it was extremely difficult for them to stay in the one place. Already in autumn 377, there was nothing left north of the Haemus Mountains, and the pattern of the subsequent war years, in so far as we can reconstruct it, saw them moving from one part of the Balkans to another. Sometimes it was the Roman army that forced them on, but this restlessness was largely attributable to their lack of secure food supplies.

Victory at Hadrianople allowed the Goths to range as they wished in Thrace during the rest of 378. The next year, however, even though the Empire had no more than light skirmishing forces available in the eastern Balkans, they shifted the centre of their operations further west into Illyricum, the combined Gothic force advancing north-west over the Succi Pass into Dacia and Upper Moesia (map 6). In 380, Tervingi and Greuthungi then divided, perhaps because of the difficulty of supplying their combined numbers. Alatheus and Saphrax moved further north into Pannonia, where they were defeated, it seems, by the forces of the western emperor Gratian. The Tervingi under

Fritigern moved south and east along the Morava-Vardar trunk road to Thessalonica and the provinces of Macedonia and Thessaly. They seem to have learned from previous experience, contenting themselves with exacting only a moderate tribute from the cities – repeatedly taking protection money – rather than trashing the place and moving on. Whether this would have continued we cannot know, because in 381 forces of the western Empire drove the Goths back into Thrace, perhaps this time along the Via Egnatia rather than through the heart of the Balkans. It was in Thrace again, finally, in 382 that peace was made.⁵⁴

The Roman Empire, however, could not in the end, after six years of war, claim total victory, although the formal ceremony that inaugurated the peace treaty on 3 October 382 certainly took the form of a Gothic surrender. Themistius was again an eyewitness, and he leaves us in no doubt:

We have seen their leaders and chiefs, not making a show of surrendering a tattered standard, but giving up the weapons and swords with which up to that day they had held power, and clinging to the king's [the emperor Theodosius'] knees more tightly than Thetis, according to Homer, clung to the knees of Zeus when she besought him on her son's behalf, until they won a kindly nod and a voice which did not rouse war but was full of kindness, full of peace, full of benevolence and the forgiveness of sins.⁵⁵

But Themistius' vocabulary immediately signals that this was not the kind of peace deal that normally followed Roman victories over hostile would-be immigrants. The language of 'kindness', 'benevolence' and 'forgiveness' strikes a new note, and the difference is not merely rhetorical. For the surrender generated no theatrical bloodbaths, no mass selling of Goths into slavery, no large-scale distributions of Gothic captives as unfree farm labourers. When, in 383, an emperor wanted to reassure the population of Rome that the Empire was once more secure, it was Sarmatians who were slaughtered in the Colosseum, not Goths. But the Goths had killed a Roman emperor, destroyed a Roman army, and laid waste with fire and rapine large tracts of the Roman Balkans. In a world where a Roman emperor considered himself well within his rights to throw a fit if 'barbarian' ambassadors didn't grovel

with sufficient conviction, the absence of revenge, punishment and example-setting in the peace settlement of 382 is extraordinary.

Once again, we don't know everything we'd like to know about the terms agreed. They clearly broke new ground in some important ways, but although they were strikingly generous to them, the Goths did not get everything they may have wanted. Before Hadrianople, Gothic peace offers tended towards the possibility of Thrace becoming an independent Gothic kingdom. Fritigern, as we've seen, was also angling to have Valens recognize him as new overall leader of all the Gothic immigrants. Neither of these things happened. Neither Fritigern nor Alatheus nor Saphrax survived to participate in the peace deal. They may have died in battle somewhere, but, if not, I have no problem in seeing their overthrow as part of the price the Goths had to pay for peace. The Empire needed tokens of victory to show off to its taxpayers, and the survival – indeed prosperity – of the victors of Hadrianople would have been completely unacceptable. Indeed, for the next decade or so, in a replay within the frontier of the policy commonly pursued towards the Alamanni beyond the Rhine (see Chapter 3), the Romans refused to recognize any overall Gothic leader, no doubt hoping to keep them politically divided. Nor did the Goths as a whole get Thrace as an independent fiefdom. The integrity of the diocese of Thrace as a centrally run unit of the Roman Empire was reasserted with vigour. Frontier fortifications were rebuilt and remanned where necessary; Roman law and tax-gathering resumed. In this sense, Gothic ambitions had been pruned right back.

At the same time, the Goths were given grants of land for themselves, not to farm for others as unfree tenant farmers. We don't know exactly where these were located. Some were north of the Haemus Mountains in Lower Moesia and Scythia close to the Danube, where the Carpi had lived around the turn of the fourth century, but there may also have been some settlements in Macedonia.⁵⁶ Much more important, wherever they were, they were clearly in sufficiently large clusters to allow the political and cultural life of the Goths to continue. This is explicitly acknowledged in Roman sources of the late 390s, and shows up implicitly in the narrative of intervening events. One of the things that the Empire got from the peace deal was a military alliance. Not only did it take the normal draft of Gothic recruits for its regular army, but the Goths also agreed to provide much larger forces, serving under their own leaders, for specific

campaigns. These times of special service required the emperor to negotiate with leading Goths as a group. On the one occasion for which we have details, we learn that the emperor Theodosius threw a great feast for them.⁵⁷ If, in 382, the three leaders of the revolt were sacrificed as part of the peace deal, a large number of their peers clearly survived to sustain some sense of Gothic community. Under the peace, despite losing the right to operate independently under the leader of their choice, the Goths continued to enjoy the freedom to negotiate and act as one, with or against the Roman state, as we shall see in the next chapter.⁵⁸ The break with established ways of dealing with immigrants could not be clearer.

According to Themistius, speaking to the Senate of Constantinople in January 383, this transformation in imperial policy was the result of some divinely inspired decision-making on the part of Valens' successor Theodosius.⁵⁹

He was the first who dared entertain the notion that the power of the Romans did not now lie in weapons, nor in breastplates, spears and unnumbered manpower, but that there was need of some other power and provision, which, to those who rule in accordance with the will of God, comes silently from that source, which subdues all nations, turns all savagery to mildness and to which alone arms, bows, cavalry, the intransigence of the Scythians, the boldness of the Alans, the madness of the Massagetai yield.

Taking his inspiration from God – and it was really to Him that he owed his appointment as eastern emperor – Theodosius understood that a better and more total victory could be won through forgiveness than by arms. Consequently, his chief negotiator 'led the Goths [to the emperor] docile and amenable, all but twisting their hands behind their backs, so that it was a matter of doubt whether he had beaten the men in war or won their friendship'. And the overall outcome, for Romans and Goths, was better for both:

If the Goths have not been utterly wiped out, no complaint should be raised . . . Was it then better to fill Thrace with corpses or with farmers? To make it full of tombs or living men? . . . I hear from those who have returned from there that they are now turning the metal of their swords and breastplates into hoes and pruning hooks, and that while paying distant respect to Ares [god

of war], they offer prayers to Demeter [goddess of corn and fruitfulness] and Dionysus [god of wine].

The Goths, Themistius told the Senate, have given up fighting for farming, and everyone has gained. Theodosius, Themistius' new employer, had come up with a brilliant solution – forgiveness for the Goths and a compromise peace that would subdue them more thoroughly than war ever could, while considerably benefiting the Empire. Once again, it's important to remember the tyranny of imperial ideology and the fact that Themistius was a remarkably adept propagandist (over a thirty-year period, he managed to create a niche for himself with no fewer than four imperial employers). As usual, he was being economical with the truth – before coming up with his peace deal, Theodosius had had a pretty good shot at winning the Gothic war by more conventional means.

The death of Valens had left a power vacuum which lasted until Gratian appointed Theodosius as his counterpart in the east in January 379. The new emperor had clearly been appointed to avenge Hadrianople. He came from a distinguished military family – his father was a five-star general under the emperor Valentinian I – and he had a good military record of his own. Immediately he was given temporary control of part of the prefecture of Illyricum – the dioceses of Dacia and Macedonia – which belonged to the western Empire, in order to exercise a unified control over the entire area vulnerable to the rampaging Goths. He spent his first year in office rebuilding the eastern field army: calling up veterans, recruiting new units, and drafting in more troops from Egypt and other parts of the east. Themistius' first speech for the new emperor, in spring 379, confirms the thrust of all of this activity: the emperor's initial self-presentation was as 'the man to win the Gothic war' –

It is because of . . . you [Theodosius] that we have taken a stand . . . and believe that you shall now check the impetus of success for the Scythians [the Goths] and quench the conflagration that devours all things . . . Fighting spirit returns to the cavalry and returns to the infantry. Already you make even farmers a terror to the barbarian . . . If you, though not yet in the field against the guilty ones [the Goths], have checked their wilfulness merely by pitching camp nearby and lying in blockade, what do we suppose those damned villains will suffer, when they see you readying

your spear and brandishing your shield, the lightning flash from your helm gleaming close at hand?⁶⁰

Unfortunately, things didn't work out as planned. Theodosius' new model army fell apart when it tried to take on the Goths head to head in Macedonia and Thessaly in the summer of 380. The circumstances are mysterious – the sources hint at treachery and unreliability. It was not another bloody catastrophe like Hadrianople, but there's no doubt that Theodosius failed and that the Goths overcame a second Roman army. In the autumn, Theodosius had to hand back control of the war to Gratian's generals, and it was they who eventually drove the Goths from Thessaly in summer 381, while he ran for cover in Constantinople to secure his political position there in the aftermath of military failure.⁶¹

Theodosius may have come up with a new plan, then, but not without trying traditional means first. He turned to diplomatic innovation in 382 only because military incapacity – the defeat of two Roman armies – required it. And this was the only time he resorted to such a deal. If he had won the war, I have not the slightest doubt that the normal terms would have been imposed upon any defeated Goths left inside the Empire. When, four years after 382, another group of Goths tried to force their way across the Danube, they were massacred in large numbers. Some of the survivors were drafted into the army, the rest distributed as unfree tenant farmers – both groups sent far afield, to Asia Minor.⁶²

The Goths might be hounded out of rich areas like Thessaly, ground down by constant battering of their raiding parties, starved into submission. But after the summer of 380 the Romans would not risk another set-piece battle.

Given that it was impossible, as we've seen, to admit that a God-appointed emperor had ever been forced into a course of action by barbarians or even by circumstances beyond his control, Themistius came remarkably close, in January 383, to telling the truth, making little attempt to downplay Roman disarray at the time of Theodosius' appointment:

... after the indescribable Iliad of evils on the Ister and the onset of the monstrous flame [of war], when there was not yet a king set over the affairs of the Romans, with Thrace laid waste, with Illyria laid waste, when whole armies had vanished completely

like a shadow, when neither impassable mountains, unfordable rivers, nor trackless wastes stood in the way, but when finally nearly the whole of the earth and sea had united beside the barbarians.

Nor did he pretend that Theodosius could easily have chosen to press the war to a fully victorious conclusion:

... just suppose that this destruction was an easy matter and that we possessed the means to accomplish it without suffering any consequences, although from past experience this was neither a foregone nor likely conclusion, nevertheless just suppose, as I said, that this solution lay within our power ...

For the man who had felt constrained to claim, in 364, that the loss of provinces, cities and fortresses to Persia was actually a Roman victory, this is not so far removed from an admission that Theodosius had had no choice but to opt for a compromise peace with the Goths.

'This Is Not Yet the End'

THE TRADITIONAL INTEGRITY of the Roman state had been breached, but we mustn't get carried away. We are still a long way from imperial collapse. The war on the Danube had affected only the Empire's Balkan provinces, a relatively poor and isolated frontier zone, and even here some kind of Romanness survived. The late fourth- and early fifth-century layers of the recently excavated Roman city of Nicopolis ad Istrum are striking for the number of rich houses – 45 per cent of the urban area – that suddenly appeared inside the city walls.⁶³ It looks as though, since their country villas were now too vulnerable, the rich were running their estates from safe inside the city walls. At the end of the war, moreover, both eastern and western emperors remained in secure occupation of their thrones, with their great revenue-producing centres such as Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt and North Africa entirely untouched. And most parts of the Empire hadn't even seen a Goth.

In his final spin on the peace deal Themistius tried to reassure Roman taxpayers that the Goths would lose even their semi-autonomy in due course. He took, as a case in point, some Celtic-speaking barbarians who had crossed the Hellespont in 278 BC and carved out

the territory of Galatia (named after themselves) in Asia Minor, but who over the next centuries became fully assimilated into Graeco-Roman culture.⁶⁴ Given the huge disparity in resources between themselves and the Roman Empire, it no doubt did seem that the Goths' present status must eventually be reversed, whether by long-term assimilation, as Themistius archly evokes, or, much more likely, by renewed conflict once the Roman army had been properly rebuilt. As events turned out, Themistius' confidence was misplaced. The descendants of the Tervingi and Greuthungi were destined not only to survive as Goths, but would eventually carve out on Roman soil the fully independent kingdom that they had originally sought. Writing soon after Hadrianople, Bishop Ambrose of Milan summarized the prevailing crisis with admirable economy: 'The Huns fell upon the Alans, the Alans upon the Goths and Taifali, the Goths and Taifali upon the Romans, and this is not yet the end.'⁶⁵ The bishop had in mind only the ongoing war with the Goths, but his words were prescient. The Empire would never get the chance to reopen the Gothic question on its own terms. Hadrianople was indeed not yet the end, and the Empire would have many more challenges to face before the full effects of the Hunnic revolution worked themselves out.

THE CITY OF GOD

ON A HOT AUGUST DAY IN 410, the unthinkable happened. A large force of Goths entered Rome by the Salarian Gate and for three days helped themselves to the city's wealth. The sources, without being specific, speak clearly of rape and pillage. There was, of course, much loot to be had, and the Goths had a field day. By the time they left, they had cleaned out many of the rich senatorial houses as well as all the temples, and had taken ancient Jewish treasures that had resided in Rome since the destruction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem over three hundred years before. They also left with treasure of another sort: Galla Placidia, sister of the reigning western emperor Honorius. And arson too had been on the agenda – the area around the Salarian gate and the old Senate building had been among the casualties.

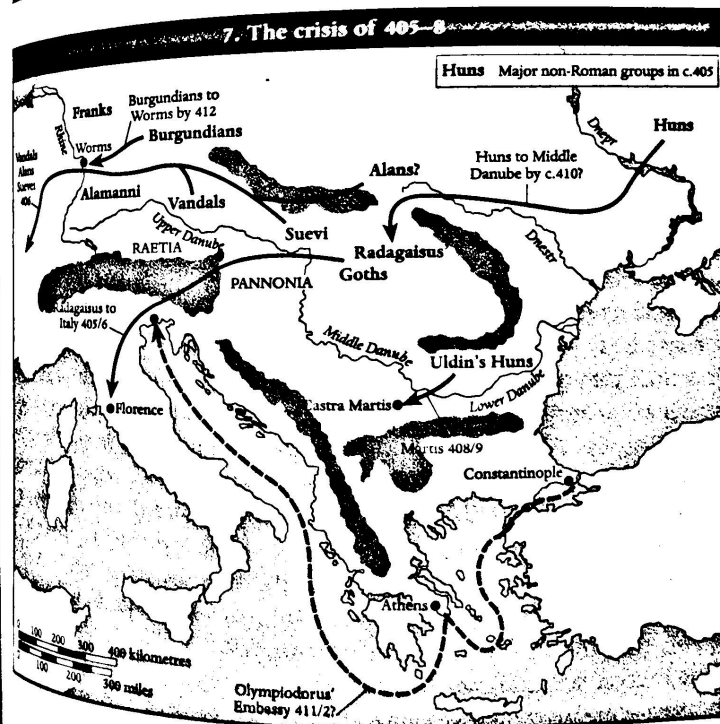
The Roman world was shaken to its foundations. After centuries as mistress of the known world, the great imperial capital had been subjected to a smash-and-grab raid of epic proportions. In the Holy Land, St Jerome, an émigré from Rome, put it succinctly: 'In one city, the whole world perished.' Pagan reactions were more pointed: 'If Rome hasn't been saved by its guardian deities, it's because they are no longer there; for as long as they were present, they preserved the City.' The adoption of Christianity, in other words, had led to this devastation. But the immediate emotional reaction to any great event is rarely the best indicator of its real significance. Reconstructing the causes, and especially the true importance, of the sack of Rome is a detective story of great complexity. It will take us back in time over the best part of two decades before that fateful summer day, and forward again for another. Geographically, the story ranges from the Caucasus Mountains in the east to the Iberian Peninsula in the west. What emerges is that, while the sack of Rome might have seemed fatefully symbolic at the time, in itself it did no fundamental harm to the Empire's capacity to fight back.

All Chaos on the Western Front

NO SINGLE SOURCE lays out for us in one clear sequence every thing leading up to this momentous event, let alone explores the underlying cause. In part, this is testimony to its complexity. The sack of Rome was the end product of an interaction between multiple protagonists that no contemporary historian – none, at least, whose work has survived – was able to understand in its entirety. There is also a more specific reason why the event presents us with so many difficulties. Much of the history of the period AD 407–25 was covered in a lengthy work by a well informed contemporary writer, Olympiodorus of Thebes, whose writings we briefly dipped into earlier. Originating in Egypt, and of impeccable classical education, he found employment in the Foreign Office of the eastern Empire, conducting a series of diplomatic missions, most notably to the Huns, accompanied for more than twenty years by his pet parrot who could 'dance, sing, call its owner's name, and do many other tricks'. Olympiodorus wrote in Greek, not Latin, and his style was less rhetorical and dramatic than was popular at the time – for which fault he apologized to his readers. This was a bonus for the modern reader, of course: his history is less overblown and more straightforwardly informative than, for instance, Ammianus Marcellinus' account of the Gothic war in the Balkans. Unfortunately, though, Olympiodorus' history does not survive in full. Some four hundred years later one Photius, a Byzantine bibliophile and (briefly) Patriarch of Constantinople, produced a long work – the *Bibliotheca* – which summarized the contents of his library; luckily for us, Olympiodorus' history was one of the volumes. From Photius' brief description, we can also tell that, much nearer to the time, the work was heavily drawn upon by two other writers, the Church historian Sozomen in the mid-fifth century and the pagan historian Zosimus in the early sixth. Both were interested in the sack of Rome and wrote out large, more or less intact chunks of the first part of Olympiodorus' history, down to the year 410. For our purposes, this is clearly a good thing, but both abridged and reworked the text for their own purposes, and in so doing introduced mistakes. In particular, Zosimus, trying to join as seamlessly as possible the work of his two main sources Olympiodorus and Eunapius, which slightly

overlapped at the early fifth century, omitted some key events and garbled others.²

AFTER THE APPEARANCE of our Gothic asylum seekers on the Danube in 376, relative calm returned to Rome's European frontiers for the best part of a generation. The peace was shattered again, however, between 405 and 408, when four major incursions overturned frontier security all the way from the Rhine to the Carpathian Mountains. The Carpathians form the east wing of the central European mountain chain which also includes the Alps. They start and finish on the River Danube, running about 1,300 kilometres from the Slovak capital Bratislava in the west to Orsova in the east, describing a huge east-facing arc (map 7). They are generally lower than the Alps, with only a few summits over 2,500 metres, and no permanent glaciers or snowfields. Their width varies dramatically between about 10 and 350 kilometres, and their western, narrower end is penetrated by many



more passes than the eastern slopes facing out towards the Great Eurasian Steppe. The Carpathians have always functioned as a defining feature of European geography, separating eastern and central Europe on the one hand, and north and south on the other. Their significance is also historical, and the organization of the later Roman Empire reflected this. The Danube region east of Orsova, the Lower Danube, belonged to Thrace and was administered from the east, whereas the Middle Danube, west and south of the mountains, protected the passes into Italy and was always part of the west. To understand the various invasions of the early fifth century, we must situate the action against this Carpathian backdrop.

In 405/6, a pagan Gothic king by the name of Radagaisus led a large force across the Alps into Italy. Because of Zosimus' garbling of Olympiodorus' history, our knowledge of this attack is patchy. Most glaringly, Zosimus reports that Radagaisus was defeated beyond the frontier, when he was actually captured at Fiesole and executed outside Florence. Zosimus also says – without giving any dates – that Radagaisus gathered under him a mass of Celtic and Germanic peoples from beyond the Rhine and Danube; this suggests that he led a multiracial force from what is now southern Germany, Austria and Bohemia.¹ All the other sources insist, however, that Radagaisus was a leader primarily of Goths. As Zosimus' reworking nowhere mentions the slightly later Rhine crossing of 406, which, as we shall see in a moment, was indeed multiracial, it seems that, in making his join between Eunapius and Olympiodorus, he jumbled up Radagaisus' invasion of Italy in 405/6 with the Rhine crossing of 406.² One key point emerges immediately. Back in 376, the Gothic Tervingi and Greuthungi had crossed the Lower Danube from east of the Carpathian Mountains into Thrace. Thirty years later, the action moved a step further west. The fact that Radagaisus' invasion fell upon Italy, without passing through the Balkans, indicates that he invaded the Empire from somewhere on the Great Hungarian Plain west of the Carpathians (map 7). Judging by finds of coin hoards, his invasion route passed through south-eastern Noricum and western Pannonia; it also generated a stream of panic-stricken refugees who preceded him over the Alps.³

Radagaisus met his end on 23 August 406. Four months later, on 31 December, a mixed force crossed the Rhine into Gaul. The three largest groupings were Vandals, Alans and Suevi – the Vandals in two separate political units, the Hasdings and the Silings. Like

that of Radagaisus, this second assault on the Empire also originated west of the Carpathian Mountains. In winter 401/2, the Vandals had raided the Roman province of Raetia, which places them, immediately before the Rhine crossing, somewhere in the Middle or Upper Danube region (map 7). For most of the fourth century they had lived further away from the Roman frontier, more to the north-east, but still west of the Carpathians, in what is now Slovakia and southern Poland.⁴ The identity of the Suevi is more problematic. The term is often used of an old Germanic confederation of the early imperial period, but between about AD 150 and the Rhine crossing itself it is no longer found in the Roman sources. Its reappearance probably indicates that some of the Marcomanni and Quadi (and possibly also Alamanni), who had formed part of that early Roman confederation and had been settled in the Middle Danube region since that time, were participants in the attack. Quadi, at least, are specifically mentioned in one source as taking part in the crossing of 406, and in the fifth century 'Suevi' came back into use as a general term for Germanic people who continued to live around the Danube bend and the fringes of the Great Hungarian Plain – presumably the descendants of other Marcomanni and Quadi who had not participated in the Rhine crossing.⁵ Both Vandals and Suevi, therefore, originated west of the Carpathians, as did other, smaller groups mentioned only by St Jerome: particularly Sarmatians and 'hostile Pannonians' (*hostes Pannonii*).⁶ As with the events of 377–82, disaffected elements among the Roman population played some part in the action (see p. 173).

The history of the Alans, Iranian-speaking nomads exploiting the dry steppe lands east of the River Don, is more complicated. As late as roughly 370, they had lived over 3,500 kilometres away from the Rhine. The first population group to feel the force of the increasing power of the Huns, some Alans quickly fell under their domination. But the Alans were organized into numerous autonomous subgroups, of which several remained independent of the Huns after 376, and many moved long distances west (both under their own steam and in company with Huns) in the generation after the Tervingi and Greuthungi initially crossed the Danube. Already in 377, a mixed force of Huns and Alans joined the Goths south of the Danube, their arrival forcing the Romans to abandon their defence of the Haemus Mountains. In 378, the emperor Gratian had 'unexpectedly' encountered more Alans at Castra Martis in Dacia Ripensis, west of the Carpathians,

which delayed still further his march to join Valens. In the early 380s, Zosimus records, the same emperor recruited a particularly large force of Alans into the western Roman army.⁹ Thus, while the Alans originated east of the Don, many of them quickly moved west of the Carpathians under the impact of Hunnic power. While they proceeded in different directions, then, the attacks of Radagaisus in 405/6 and the Rhine crossing in 406 both originated in the same broad region of Germanic Europe.

The third major invasion of this decade involved a Hunnic leader by the name of Uldin, and happened further east. Previously a Roman ally, in 408 he changed allegiances. Crossing the Danube with a force of Huns and Sciri, he seized Castra Martis and, addressing some plainly confused Roman ambassadors, he made some extravagant claims: 'He [pointed] to the sun, and [declared] that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to subjugate every region of the earth that is enlightened by that luminary.' Precisely where we should place Uldin before this invasion is unclear. In 400, he had defeated a Roman rebel, who then fled north of the Danube through Thrace, which might place him north of the lower Danube (map 7). In 406, however, he had provided military aid to the Romans, in Italy, then two years later seized a major Roman base in Dacia Ripensis, west of Orsova. These later glimpses of him suggest that we should actually place him just west of the Carpathians, perhaps in the Banat or Oltenia. The arrogance of Uldin's claims has led some to view him as the leader of a massive force. But what happened next tells us otherwise. Many of his followers were won over from their allegiance by east Roman diplomacy; the Roman army then killed or captured many of the others as they ran back hell for leather towards the Danube. Uldin is never heard of again, and his rhetoric sounds more like bluff than the arrogance of a major warlord. His gamble in seizing Castra Martis clearly backfired, and led directly to the destruction of his power base.¹⁰

The Burgundians, the fourth focus of our attention at this point, have gone down in history for their size, their taste in food and their hairdressing, thanks to the fifth-century Gallo-Roman poet and landowner Sidonius, who at one point had to share his house with some of them:

Why ... do you [an obscure senator by the name of Catullinus] bid me compose a song dedicated to Venus ... placed as I am

among long-haired hordes, having to endure Germanic speech, praising often with a wry face the song of the gluttonous Burgundian who spreads rancid butter on his hair? ... You don't have a reek of garlic and foul onions discharged upon you at early morn from ten breakfasts, and you are not invaded even before dawn ... by a crowd of giants.¹¹

In the fourth century, the domain of the Burgundians lay to the east of the Alamanni, well outside Roman territory, between the Upper Rhine and the Upper Danube, just on the other side of an old Roman frontier line abandoned in the third century (map 7). By 411 they had moved about 250 kilometres to the north-west, and now straddled the Rhine in the region of Mainz and Coblenz, at points both inside and outside the Roman province of Lower Germania. This shifting of their centre of operations hardly compares with the wholesale incursions into Roman territory described above, but the Burgundians must nonetheless be considered alongside their more adventurous peers. Something was afoot at this time in Germania west of the Carpathians.¹² After an uneventful couple of decades, the barbarians were on the move again.

To grasp the significance of all this, we need some idea of the numbers involved. Sources for this period being what they are, we have no reliable figures, and some historians would argue that it is pointless even to raise the issue. In my view, however, there are a few pointers, direct and indirect, that between them suggest at least an order of magnitude. An important starting-point is the fact that both the attack of Radagaisus and the Rhine invasion involved mixed population groups: women, children and other noncombatants, as well as fighting men. The constituent elements of these migrant groups is not something that our Roman sources tend to dwell upon: their interest was always firmly focused on the men, those responsible for any military or political threat that a migrant force might pose to the Roman state. All the same, women and children are mentioned just about enough to confirm their presence in both groups. The wives and children of some of the followers of Radagaisus, who eventually found themselves drafted into the Roman army, were, we are told by Zosimus, quartered as hostages in a number of Italian cities.¹³ For the Vandals, the Alans and the Suevi we have no evidence contemporary with their first moves across the Rhine; but another group of Alans, operating in Gaul with some Goths in the early 410s, certainly

had their families in tow.¹⁴ And when the main force of Vandals and Alans moved on to North Africa in the 420s (see Chapter 6), they certainly moved in large mixed groups of men, women and children. It is possible to argue that wives had been picked up en route, but I see no good reason to doubt that they had been present since 406. As in 376, whole communities were on the march.

As to the actual numbers, Uldin's force – to judge by the fact that they seized only the one town and were then easily dispersed – perhaps wasn't very large. Nonetheless, disposing of all the Sciri captured on his defeat posed the Constantinopolitan authorities a huge administrative headache, so that we must be talking of several thousand individuals.¹⁵ Radagaisus' force of Goths, and the Vandals, Alans and Suevi, however, could each put much more substantial military forces into the field. To fight Radagaisus in 406, the western Empire was forced to mobilize thirty *numeri* (regiments) – on paper, at least 15,000 men¹⁶ – as well as call upon allies such as the Alan auxiliaries under Sarus and the Huns of Uldin (making their last appearance in Roman colours before seizing Castra Martis in 408). On Radagaisus' defeat, 12,000 of his warriors were drafted into the Roman army, which still left enough over for the bottom to fall out of the slave market when the remaining prisoners were sold off. All of this suggests that Radagaisus' force originally consisted of 20,000-plus fighting men. The proportion of combatants to noncombatants is generally reckoned at something like 1:4–5, so that his total number of followers may have been heading towards the 100,000 mark.¹⁷

For the Vandals, Alans and Suevi who crossed the Rhine, the best indication comes from about two decades later, when the Vandals and Alans together are said to have numbered a maximum of 80,000, implying that they could field a military force of 15–20,000.¹⁸ This followed very heavy losses inflicted especially on the Siling Vandals and Alans, and makes no allowance at all for the Suevi, so that the original force that crossed the Rhine probably numbered more like 30,000 warriors – again, therefore, around 100,000 people in total. For the Burgundians, two sources offer us the figure of 80,000, but Jerome thought it a total figure for the entire population (suggesting a military force of perhaps about 15,000), while the Spanish chronicler Orosius says this was the size of their army.¹⁹ As with many of the figures for the groups involved in the invasions, none of this is very convincing, but they do suggest – in each case – military forces of at least 20,000.

plus, and total populations nearing 100,000. Such a scale is more than enough to explain how the immigrants were able to force their way across the Roman frontier in the first place. Late Roman military reorganization operated with substantial numbers of garrison troops stationed in a sequence of watch-towers and larger installations along the border: in the case of the Danube and Rhine, right on or adjacent to the river line. But these forces were designed to counter only endemic small-scale raiding; larger incursions, even of a few thousand warriors, were the job of the 'comitatensian' troops (see Glossary, *comitatenses*) stationed behind the frontier. Tens of thousands of barbarians, even if many were noncombatants, were well beyond the competence of border troops.

THESE VAST POPULATION displacements also show up in the archaeological evidence. Two geographically extensive material cultural systems dominated the southern regions of central and eastern Europe in the third and fourth centuries AD: the Cernjachov and Przeworsk (map 7). The Przeworsk was one of the old Germanic or Germanic-dominated cultures of central Europe, with a continuous history of development which, by about AD 400, stretched back well over half a millennium. In the fourth century, it covered what is now central and southern Poland, parts of Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The Cernjachov system was a much more recent phenomenon, dating to the third century AD. By the later fourth, it had spread through what is now Wallachia, Moldavia and the southern Ukraine, from the Carpathians to the River Don. Old-style archaeology used to equate these kinds of culture with individual 'peoples', but they are much better understood as systems incorporating many separate population groups and political units. What created the boundaries of these cultural areas were not the political frontiers of a particular people, but the geographical limits within which population groups interacted with sufficient intensity to make some or all of the remains of their physical culture – pottery, metalwork, building styles, burial goods and so on – look very similar. The Cernjachov system was dominated by the military power of the Goths, but included other Germanic immigrants to the northern Black Sea region, together with indigenous Dacians of the Carpathian region and Iranian-speaking Sarmatians. The area it covered was subdivided into a number of separate kingdoms (see Chapter 3).

Given its much lengthier history, the Przeworsk area may have been culturally more unified, with a higher percentage of Germanic speakers, but they were no more a political entity than were the Cernjachov areas. The Vandals were to be found within the Przeworsk confines, but also a number of other groups whose populations also interacted with those of the Cernjachov system, for many aspects of their material cultures, not least glass, were very similar. The main discernible difference between the two lay in the fact that Cernjachov populations rarely buried weapons with their dead, while Przeworsk populations did so regularly.

Both of these systems vanished in the late Roman period. A certain amount of controversy surrounds the date of the Cernjachov collapse, but all working on the problem agree that it had disappeared by about 450;²⁰ likewise, although it continued for longer in the north, the Przeworsk culture in southern Poland had disappeared by c.420. From the Ukraine in the east to Hungary in the west, traditional – in the Przeworsk case, very long-established – patterns of material remains thus disappeared between about AD 375 and 430.

When cultures were equated with peoples, it was natural to see 'culture collapse', as this phenomenon has come to be known, as reflecting mass migration: a given culture disappeared from an area with the people who generated it. And given that Vandals and Goths, traditionally equated with the Przeworsk and Cernjachov cultures, were appearing as immigrants in the Roman world at the same moment as the two cultures disappeared, this seemed logical enough. But since cultures actually reflect the interaction of mixed populations, culture collapse cannot be so easily explained. Iron Age Germanic cultures such as the Przeworsk and Cernjachov are identified on the basis of the continued development over time of particular items: especially pottery types – notably, fine wares – and metalwork of various kinds, such as weapons and personal ornaments. When we say that a culture has ended, what we mean is that a demonstrable continuity of development in these characteristic items ceases in the archaeological record. Whether the disappearance of these items means that an area's entire population had disappeared as well is debatable. Recently, some have argued that the characteristic items used to identify the Przeworsk and Cernjachov systems were all quite expensive, produced only for a relatively small military elite. Their disappearance need mean no more, theoretically, than that these consumers had

moved on, leaving a substantial peasant population behind. Since this supposed peasantry used the kind of rough pottery that is impossible to date, and did not have metal ornaments, its persistence would be archaeologically invisible. The argument fits in with other attempts, the written and archaeological evidence notwithstanding, to argue that the migrations into the Roman Empire of the later fourth and early fifth centuries constituted a relatively small-scale phenomenon.

Even accepting that culture collapse doesn't have to mean the total disappearance of an existing population, I don't find this conclusion convincing. When you put Radagaisus, the Rhine crossing, Uldin and the Burgundians in their proper chronological and geographical relationship, it becomes clear that the years 405–10 saw a huge population displacement out of Germania west of the Carpathians. We are not able, and surely never will be, to put an absolute figure on the combined movements, or to reckon the migrants as a percentage of the total population of the areas affected. At the very least, though, the culture collapse shows that these population movements were significant enough to transform the material culture of central Europe, where they originated. Written sources too, while far from complete, confirm that these migrations were not undertaken merely by a tiny social elite – unlike, for instance, the case of the Norman Conquest when, after 1066, only about 2,000 immigrant families moved in to take control of all the landed assets of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom. Radagaisus' force, for instance, included two categories of fighter, not just his elite warriors. This important piece of evidence is entirely consistent with more general indications that Gothic groups of the era were always composed of two grades of fighting men: the 'best' (the freemen) and the rest (the freed).²¹ Moreover, as we saw in Chapter 3, fourth-century Germanic society, while certainly hierarchic, was not yet dominated by the kind of very small feudal elite that would dominate the post-Carolingian society.

Some thirty years after the Tervingi and Greuthungi crossed the Lower Danube, then, a second crisis unfolded. Roman frontier security, this time west rather than east of the Carpathians, was breached on no fewer than three occasions within a short time. The four main invasions – Radagaisus', the Rhine crossings, Uldin's, and the Burgundians' – hit the Roman frontier at different points. Radagaisus moved south and west into Italy; the Vandals, Alans and Suevi, as well as the Burgundians, slammed west into the Rhine frontier and across it, while

Uldin moved south. These movements, originating from broadly the same region, add up to a massive convulsion along Rome's European frontiers. Tens of thousands of warriors, which means well over a hundred thousand people all told – just possibly a few hundred thousand – were on the move.

Cometh the Hour, Cometh the Hun

IF THE SCALE AND geographical concentration of the crisis of 405–8 can't be picked up easily from the ancient sources, its causes are even harder to reconstruct. Fragmentary at best, at this point the written sources practically dry up. One, written over a hundred years later, records that it was food shortages that drove the Vandals out of central Europe, but this is unconvincing. They had lived there for hundreds of years, and the period around AD 400 was one of European climatic optimum, with sunny, warm summers. Uldin's boast (see p. 196) might indicate that his motive was conquest pure and simple; but, then again, the ease with which he was crushed suggests that he was not nearly powerful enough to make a conqueror.

In my view, the crisis of 405–8 must be seen as a rerun of 376, with the further movements of nomadic Huns as the trigger. This has been suggested many times before, but, in the absence of explicit confirmation, has never achieved consensus.²² It is precisely at this point that it becomes important to realize that Huns in large numbers had not themselves been directly involved in the action of 376.²³ As late as 395, twenty years after the Goths crossed the Danube, most of the Huns were still well to the east. In that year they launched a massive raid into Roman territory, but via the Caucasus, not over the Danube (map 7). This has sometimes been explained as a cunning plan by Danube-based Hunnic groups to outflank the Roman defences, but both men and horses would have been exhausted by the inevitable 2,000-kilometre trek around the northern coast of the Black Sea before they could even launch their assault. The direction of the attack makes it clear that, as late as 395, the Huns were still centred much further to the east, perhaps on the Volga Steppe; and, in at least partial confirmation of the point, for a decade or more after 376 Goths continued to provide Rome's main opposition north of the Lower Danube, as we saw in Chapter 4.²⁴

But by the 420s large numbers of Huns were established in central Europe, occupying the Great Hungarian Plain west of the Carpathian Mountains. This point is well documented. In 427, for instance, the Romans expelled them from Pannonia, the richest Roman province south of the Middle Danube (map 7).²⁵ And in 432, when a Roman general needed their help, he travelled 'through Pannonia' to reach them, his route showing that they had remained west of the Carpathians even after the expulsion.²⁶ By the early 440s, likewise, Hunnic royal tombs were to be found on the opposite bank of the Danube from the city of Margus – again, firmly west of the Carpathians, as was Attila's main base in the 440s.²⁷ Sometime between 395 and 425, then, the main body of the Huns made a 1,700-kilometre trek westwards from north of the Caucasus to the Great Hungarian Plain.

Whether it was precisely during 405–8 that the Huns made this move is less certain, but we do have a few tantalizing hints that this may have been the case. For example, in 412/13 Olympiodorus and his parrot visited them on an embassy. Part of the journey involved a horrendous sea voyage, during which their ship put in at Athens. Since Olympiodorus worked for the eastern Empire, he must have started from Constantinople. And since his route to the Huns passed via Athens, he was presumably looking to sail through the Aegean and up the Adriatic, probably to Aquileia at its head. This points to the Middle Danube Plain as the home of Olympiodorus' Huns by the early 410s, since the port of Aquileia had long existed to service this region (map 7).²⁸

Confirmation that something very serious was afoot in central Europe round about the year 410 is provided by other, more indirect evidence. At this time the eastern imperial authorities in Constantinople perceived a substantial stepping-up of the threat facing their Balkan territories. In January 412, a programme was put in place to strengthen the Danubian fleets.²⁹ One year later, Constantinople, vulnerable to attack through the Balkans from the north, was provided with new defences. It was at this point that the city acquired its famous landwalls: the formidable triple belt of fortifications much of which still stands in modern Istanbul.³⁰ These walls were powerful enough to keep the city safe for a millennium, and no attacker managed to take it from its landward side until 1453, 1,040 years after their construction, when Turkish cannon blasted a hole through them, near the modern Topkapi coach station. Both of these defensive measures have

sometimes been taken as a response to Uldin's attacks of 408/9, but in that case they would be strangely postdated, and Uldin had anyway suffered a crushing defeat. I find it very tempting, therefore, to associate them with the closer proximity of the main Hunnic threat.

The evidence is not all that we would like it to be. But, as already noted, it is certain that by 420, and quite probably by 410, the Huns had moved from the Caucasus, where they were in about 395, to the Great Hungarian Plain. Given that their arrival on the outer fringes of Europe in 376 had triggered the appearance of the Goths on the banks of the Danube, it is inevitable that a second Hunnic advance into the heart of Europe would have had similarly dramatic knock-on effects.³¹ There is also the fact that we have no serious alternative to fall back on. General Roman policy towards immigrants had not changed. All the groups of 405-8 were resisted; none of them was licensed to enter imperial territory. Moreover, Roman frontier security had been reasserted successfully since 376 (and many of the immigrants of 405-8, as we shall see, were about to die). The Rhine crossing of December 406 occurred long enough after Radagaisus' catastrophic defeat - he had been executed in August that year - for us to suppose that news of it would have filtered back across the frontier, yet still the next wave of immigrants came. Again, all of this suggests that the events of 405-8 were motivated from the barbarian side of the frontier, and were not dependent upon changing perceptions of imperial policy or imperial strength.

The story takes some piecing together, but the pieces do fit. The key points are these. The intrusion of the Huns into Europe was a two-stage process, part one (the occupation of land north of the Black Sea) triggering the crisis of 376, part two (the occupation of the Great Hungarian Plain) causing, and being preceded by, the displacements from that plain into the Roman world of Radagaisus, the Vandals, Alans and Suevi, Uldin and the Burgundians. All these groups came from the region that was to be the heartland of Hunnic power for the next fifty years, just before Huns in large numbers are documented occupying it. This cannot be coincidence. Like the Goths in 376, many of the inhabitants of Germania west of the Carpathians voted with their feet between 405 and 408: the dangers inherent in trying to make a new life on Roman soil were less threatening than the notion of life under Hunnic domination. Where the crisis of 376 reflected the appearance of the Huns on the far eastern fringes of Europe, beyond

the Carpathians, that of 405-8 was caused by their transfer to the very heart of Europe.

THE FIRST STEP, remote as it might seem, on the road to the sack of Rome in 410 was taken far off on the northern shores of the Black Sea. The further advances of the Huns threw Germania west of the Carpathians into crisis, and the major knock-on effect observed by the Romans was large-scale armed immigration into their Empire. For the eastern Empire, the new proximity of the Huns generated a heightened anxiety which betrayed itself in new and far-reaching defensive measures. But it was the western Empire that bore the brunt of the fall-out both immediately and in the longer term. The collision of the invaders with the central Roman authorities and local Roman elites would have momentous repercussions.

Pillage and Usurpation

THE IMMEDIATE EFFECTS of these population displacements were exactly what you would expect. None of the refugees entered the Empire by agreement; all behaved as enemies and were treated as such. The Goths of Radagaisus at first met little opposition, but when they reached Florence, matters came to a head. They had blockaded the city and reduced it virtually to the point of capitulation, when a huge Roman relief force, commanded by Stilicho, generalissimo of the western Empire, arrived just in the nick of time. Stilicho ruled the west at this point, in the name of the emperor Honorius, infant son of Theodosius I. He had mobilized for this counterattack an enormous force: thirty regiments from the field army of Italy, together with a contingent probably from the Rhine frontier,³² supplemented by Alan and Hunnic auxiliaries.³³ The delay incurred in mobilizing so many men explains why Radagaisus had enjoyed a free hand in northern Italy for six months or more. But when the Roman response eventually came, it was brilliantly successful. Radagaisus was forced to retreat with his army up to the heights of Fiesole, and there blockaded. The Gothic king eventually abandoned the scene and tried to escape, but was captured and executed. Some of his followers were dispersed, many of them being sold into slavery, as mentioned earlier;³⁴ while at some point in the action his higher-status warriors were brought over